Labor scores some wins

Rail, airport, building trades workers all gain protections; but opportunities also missed

By JOE KENDO

The 2020 legislative session ended with a level of uncertainty not experienced by most in their working – if not living – memory. Unlike previous years’ sine die, there were little celebration when the session ended March 12. At the time, there were fewer than 500 known COVID-19 infections and 31 deaths. Gov. Jay Inslee had just prohibited large gatherings. Despite the pall that fell over our state in the waning weeks of the session, Washington’s labor community accomplished quite a bit, though much was left on the table.

Safe staffing for trains

Our rail labor workers represented by SMART/UTU and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (IBT) secured the passage of HB 1841 to require two-person crews on most freight and passenger trains, and authorizing the Utilities and Transportation Commission to regulate safety standards for these lines. This effort led by Rep. Marcus Riccelli (D-Spokane) and Sen. Patty Kuderer (D-Bellevue) capped a seven-year struggle by these workers to secure safe staffing levels for an industry where employee fatigue and minor human error can lead to catastrophic derailments. While surely a win for the men and women who work on and around trains, this is also an important milestone for public safety in communities through which thousands of miles of rail run, from Spokane to Everett, and Vancouver to Bellingham.

Airport labor standards

Airport workers represented by UNITE HERE Local 8 achieved a big win.

The WSLC proudly backs racial equity bills, opportunities for all

When I campaigned for the honor of serving as President of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, I emphasized the importance of maintaining and advancing the WSLC’s groundbreaking racial equity work. As we continue to educate our state’s union leaders and rank-and-file members about the link between race and labor struggles, we are making our movement stronger.

In addition to these educational efforts, it’s important for organized labor to support public policy changes that promote racial equality. That’s why the WSLC was proud to support the following important bills all championed by women of color in the State Legislature. All of the following bills were approved in 2020 and signed into law by Gov. Jay Inslee:

■ Rep. Mia Gregerson (D-SeaTac) sponsored HB 1783 to establish the new Washington State Office of Equity. It will promote access to equitable opportunities and resources that reduce disparities and improve outcomes statewide across all sectors of government.

■ Unfortunately, the funding for HB 1783 was among the COVID-19 casualties when Gov. Jay Inslee vetoed almost all new spending in the budget. The WSLC will fight to restore this funding when state revenues recover from the coronavirus costs and the resulting economic slowdown.

■ Sen. Rebecca Saldada (D-Seattle) sponsored SB 5165 to prohibit discrimination based on immigration or citizenship status in our state. It does not nonsupervise federal law, but allows the state to maximize protections against discrimination.
Progress on labor-climate policies, but more needed

By VLAD GUTMAN-BRITTEN

In the wake of a 2019 session where environmental and labor stakeholders came together to advance the most ambitious climate agenda in state history, the 2020 session was a decidedly more ambitious climate agenda in state history, but more work remains. Adopting climate policies that disadvantage people of color are such forces. I pledge to you that we will continue to combat them, both inside and outside the labor movement—inspiring in Washington state government.

In tandem with this work on the ground, the WSLC is in conversation with affiliates, identifying policies to bring to Olympia in 2021 in support of our members and all working people in Washington.

While our state is in the enviable position of being able to tap into wind and solar resources, more resources will be needed to mitigate the worst impacts of this crisis. Hospitals and healthcare workers will need more support, and we will need serious investments in jobs assistance, apprenticeship programs, and child care. We need stronger protections for workers on the job, including more avenues for holding unscrupulous employers responsible.

Our state’s back roads, regressive tax system exacerbates the issues we face in our response. State revenue is drawn heavily from sales tax, an unreliable source in a state where residents are urged to stay in their homes, and a decline in sales transactions seems certain. Reliance on sales tax revenue, already tenuous and drawn disproportionately from working people, is a significant stumbling block. This crisis lays bare the urgency of reforming our tax code.

We will need to fight for bold policy ideas that provide concrete relief to working people, not shying away from systemic changes; and we need allies to succeed. We will need serious investments in jobs assistance, apprenticeship programs, and child care. We need stronger protections for workers on the job, including more avenues for holding unscrupulous employers responsible.

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Building trades win priority bills

Several significant bills supported by Washington’s building and construction trades were passed into law in 2020. They include:

**BID LISTING**—Some public works contractors alter their lists of subcontractors after winning bids so they can pay lower wages and boost profits at the expense of taxpayers—and project quality.

That’s why passage of ESSB 5457, sponsored by Sen. Karen Keiser (D-Des Moines), was a priority for the WSLC, the Washington State Building and Construction Trades Council, and Ironworkers Local 86. It will reduce “bid shopping” by having more subcontractors listed in bids for major public works projects.

Under current law, on projects costing more than $1 million, the prime contractor must list the subcontractors that will perform HVAC, plumbing, and electrical work. ESSB 5457 extends this requirement to subcontractors who do structural steel and rebar work. This is a common-sense policy that assures winning bidders provide decent jobs and maintain good quality on major public works projects.

ESSB 5457 passed the Senate 31-16 (see Vote #1), passed the House 97-0, and was signed into law by Gov. Jay Inslee.

**PLUMBING CODE OVERHAUL**—For years, the Plumbers and Pipefitters (UPFA) union has worked with legislators to revise and update Washington state’s plumbing code. This year, the UA made a concerted effort to include industry stakeholders in the process and come up with ways to protect consumers and honest contractors from unlicensed and unprofessional plumbers, while also bringing more young workers into the industry that desperately needs them.

SB 6170, also sponsored by Sen. Keiser, is a comprehensive overhaul of this code supported by both labor and business. It establishes clear requirements for a plumbing contractor license, creates a residential service plumbing certificate, modifies supervisory ratios of plumber trainees to certified plumbers, and expands the Advisory Board of Plumbers to regularly review these standards and make sure they work as intended. It passed both houses unanimously.

**APPRENTICESHIP COMPLIANCE**—SB 6239, sponsored by Sen. Steve Conway (D-Tacoma), strengthens apprenticeship utilization requirements on public works projects. If a building contractor has a history of penalties for not meeting these requirements, or is habitual in using the “good faith exemption,” it must submit a plan to the state explaining how it will correct the shortcomings. SB 6239 passed the Senate 37-10 (Vote #3) and the House 60-37 (Vote #8), and was signed by Inslee.

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**Death of SHB 2036 was far from transparent**

SHB 2036, the House-approved health system transparency bill, passed the Senate Health and Long Term Care Committee and was referred to the Senate Ways & Means Committee. On March 2, the deadline for fiscal committee action, a routine voice vote was taken on SHB 2036 in Ways & Means, and the bill appeared to pass. But as always, that passage is “subject to signatures.” Committee members

with debt-collection agencies.

SHB 2036, as ratified, version of the bill, passed the House 56-42 (see Vote #3). It retained strong support from the WSLC and other unions, but was opposed by the Washington State Hospital Association. Ultimately, SHB 2036 failed to advance from Ways & Means and died for the session.

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**WSLC Legislative Lobbying Conference**

Hundreds of delegates representing unions across the state gathered in Olympia on Feb. 6 for the Washington State Labor Council’s 2020 Legislative Lobbying Conference. They learned about the status of priority legislation affecting working families, rallied on the State Capitol steps to support HB 1888, and then fanned out across the campus to meet with their legislators. Here, delegates from the 30th Legislative District meet with Sen. Claire Wilson (D-Auburn) and share information on the pro-labor bills.

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**PRIVACY**

Continued from Page 1

At the start of the session, HB 1888 faced stiff opposition from newspapers and others. Recent controversial efforts to exempt legislators from certain aspects of public disclosure law had enraged advocates for open government. HB 1888 was portrayed as yet another attack.

The Washington Federation of State Employees/AFSCME 28, a member of the WSLC, the Washington State Public Employees Association, SEIU 925, the State Council of Firefighters, WPEA/UCFW 365 and other public employees unions led an aggressive campaign to educate and mobilize their members on the issue. In the end, legislators were bombarded by thousands of emails and phone calls, and hundreds of public employees came to Olympia in support of HB 1888. They told lawmakers that disclosure of birth dates endangers victims of domestic abuse or violent crime, increases risk of identity theft and doxxing (where personal identifying data is maliciously posted online), and puts families’ safety at risk.

“Other states have acknowledged their duty to protect public employees’ birth dates,” said WSLC Secretary Treasurer April Sims at a Feb. 6 rally on the Capitol steps. “Oregon and California, for example, exempt birth dates from disclosure. It’s time for Washington to protect its public employees’ safety and privacy as well, by passing HB 1888.”

The pressure to fix the law was enormous and forced the bill’s opponents to the table to negotiate a compromise. Led by Hudgins and Sen. Patty Kuderer (D-Bellevue), a compromise was reached to exempt birth dates but allow newspaper reporters legitimate access when investigating government wrongdoing. The amended bill easily passed on bipartisan votes: 91-7 in the House (see Vote #2) and 36-10 in the Senate (Vote #5). Gov. Jay Inslee then signed it into law.
**The good, bad and ugly bill sponsorships**

Lots of bills that would have serious benefits or consequences for Washington’s working families never get a full House or Senate vote. But you can tell who supports the good, bad and ugly bills by checking the list of sponsors and committee votes.

**SB 6239 (Conway)—Public works apprenticeship compliance. Right vote: YES (Passed 37-10 on Feb. 18.)**

**HB 1888 (Hudgins)—Protecting public school employee safety and privacy regarding birthdates. Right vote: YES (Passed 36-10 on Mar. 4.)**

**HB 1783 (Gregerson)—Creating a Washington State Office of Equity to promote access to equitable opportunities. Right vote: YES (Passed 28-21 on Mar. 5.)**

**HB 2308 (Slater)—Requiring job title reporting to help track educational and certification workforce placements. Right vote: YES (Passed 34-14 on Mar. 5.)**

**HB 1521 (Dolan)—Government contracting accountability and transparency—Requiring cost-benefit analyses before contracting out the work of state employees. Right vote: YES (Passed 31-18 Mar. 5.)**

**The WORKERS BILL OF RIGHTS**

The Washington State Office of Equity (WASEO) and the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, support this legislation to require that employers implement a legal and reasonable accommodation policy, end employment discrimination, prevent worker harassment, and offer to union employees “structured settlements,” also known as compromise and release, in the workers’ compensation system, an issue that has been a significant problem for workers in the state. WASEO endorses the bill with a vote of YES (Passed 37-10 on Feb. 18.)

**HB 2017 (Frame)—Administrative law judge collective bargaining. Right vote: YES (Passed 29-18 Mar. 4.)**

**HB 2788 (Hudgins)—Funding private charter schools. Right vote: NO (Passed 30-17 on Jan. 24.)**

**SB 6534 (Cleveland)—Creating an ambulance transport quality assurance fee. Right vote: YES (Passed 44-4 on Mar. 12.)**

**SB 3543 (Dolan)—Creating a task force to study privatization of our state-run workers’ compensation system, an idea that Washington voters have been overwhelmed by the number of bills that would have exempted certain public contractors from public employee safety and privacy laws. Right vote: YES (Passed 31-18 Mar. 5.)**

**HB 2404—LOWER WAGES IN RURAL COUNTIES — This bill would have “adjusted downward” wage standards, including the minimum wage, in every county outside of King County. Right vote: NO (Passed 30-17 on Jan. 24.)**

**SB 6372 — WORKERS’ COMP COMPROMISE AND RELEASE— This bill would have expanded so-called “structured settlements,” also known as compromise and release, in the workers’ compensation system. Injured workers, who are often in desperate financial circumstances, would be offered lump-sum buyouts that are less than they would otherwise receive to close their claims. Right vote: YES (Passed 37-10 on Feb. 18.)**

**CO-SPONSORS:** Reps. Hoff, Van Werven, Cory

**CO-SPONSORS: Rep. Drew Stokesbary (D-Auburn) and Rep. Strom Peterson (D-Edmonds)**

**CO-SPONSORS: Sens. Rebecca Sabalos, Karen Keiser, Bob Hasegawa, Kevin Van De Wege, Claire Wilson, Joe Nguyen, Joe Fitzgibbon, and essayists, who are often in desperate financial circumstances, would be offered lump-sum buyouts that are less than they would otherwise receive to close their claims. Right vote: YES (Passed 37-10 on Feb. 18.)**

**CO-SPONSORS:** Rep. Monica Stonier (D-Vancouver)

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The most important election...

By CHERIKA CARTER

It seems like every two years some body’s trying to tell us, “This is the most important election of our lives.” Well... THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ELECTION OF OUR LIVES!

Many of us are focused in 2020 on the dire consequences for working families if Donald Trump is re-elected. But one big lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic is that we run state government can have a far more direct impact on your job, your family, and your life. It’s not an exaggeration to say that, given another crisis like this, the difference between having Jay Inslee as your governor versus... the alternative... could literally be the difference between life and death.

As we face the economic and public health challenges that COVID-19 leaves in its wake, who we elect to statewide offices and to the Legislature will be of critical importance. We need to make sure that the people making decisions about addressing state revenue shortfalls and maintaining critical public services will not place the burden on working people. And that’s why we need to work harder than ever to ensure that champions of working families are selected.

We are fortunate in Washington state to have many champions who are incumbents. They need our support. We are so fortunate to have labor organization members—many of whom participated in the WSLC’s Path to Power candidate training—who are running for the Legislature, because they share our values.

We will be in their neighborhoods, talking one-on-one conversations that are most effective way to convey this information. There’s a good chance we’ll be wearing masks when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections.

So when you get that call from me that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections. But when we do Labor Neighbor walks. But that’s OK because we will be the super heroes of the 2020 elections.
Administrative Law Judges win right to join together

If you disagree with a government action, you have the right to appeal that decision with the state’s Office of Administrative Hearings. Most of these appeals relate to unemployment benefits, child support decisions and Medicaid coverage, but the OAH hears appeals for most state agencies and even some local governments.

Those appeals are heard by more than 110 Administrative Law Judges, who specialize in certain areas of expertise. These folks have big caseloads, hear more than 50,000 cases each year, and do the same work as administrative adjudicators within other agencies. The difference is that they have no collective bargaining rights, and the lack of wage predictability and security has led to recruitment and retention challenges.

HB 2017, sponsored by Rep. Noel Frame (D-Seattle), would resolve this inequity and grant ALJs collective bargaining rights. Unfortunately these days, allowing any workers to come together to form a union is a partisan issue. But thanks to strong advocacy from the Washington Federation of State Employees/AFSCME Council 28 and Democratic control of the Legislature, HB 2017 passed the House 57-40 (Vote #1), the Senate 29-18 (Vote #6), and was signed by Gov. Jay Inslee.

Improving education, training

HB 2308, sponsored by Rep. Vandana Slatter (D-Kirkland), adds the reporting of occupational classifications or job titles to employers’ quarterly Employment Security reports. This information will be kept confidential, but will help track educational and certification workforce placements and provide better information to workers and students making decisions about education and training.

Banning use of private prisons

SB 6442, sponsored by Sen. Rebecca Saldana (D-Seattle), prohibits the state from sending people to for-profit prisons outside the state. It includes some exceptions for involuntary placement in mental health, substance use rehab, and similar services. Supported by the WSCLC and multiple community groups, it passed the House 64-33, the Senate 29-20, and was signed by Inslee.

Quality ambulance services

SB 6534, sponsored by Sen. Annette Cleveland (D-Vancouver), creates an ambulance transport quality assurance fee for Medicaid-funded emergency ambulance transports by private providers. Supported by the Teamsters union, AMR Emergency Medical Technicians, and the Washington Ambulance Association, this will help promote quality services and boost wages at those ambulance companies. It passed the House 87-10 and the Senate 44-4 (Vote #11).

3% increase for PERS 1, TRS 1

HB 1390, sponsored by Rep. Mari Leavitt (D-University Place), grants a one-time 3 percent increase to the retirement benefits of PERS 1 and TRS 1 retirees. This one-time cost-of-living increase is desperately needed and helps offset the rising costs of retiree health benefits. It passed both houses unanimously.

Promoting affordable housing

Housing affordability is a statewide crisis for workers in urban and rural communities, and for first-time buyers and renters alike. The WSCLC supports strategies to increase housing stock, to adopt smart land use standards to promote housing options, and to support tenants burdened by extreme rental costs.

HB 1590, sponsored by Rep. Beth Doglio (D-Olympia), allows a local sales and use tax for affordable housing to be established by a councilmanic authority. It passed the House 52-46 (Vote #6), Senate 42-5 (Vote #9), and was signed by Inslee.

Progress for H-2A farmworkers, but much more is needed

Much of Washington’s essential agricultural workforce is recruited using international labor contracting systems and the federal H-2A temporary visa program. But when our state’s laws governing farm labor contracting were written in the 1950s, and last revised in 1985, the H-2A program did not even exist.

Since that time, Washington has experienced many instances of abuse and exploitation of H-2A workers brought to the U.S. under false pretenses and then threatened with deportation if they complained. Under current law, it’s too easy for H-2A workers who speak up about unpaid wages or unsafe working conditions to be disciplined, fired, or blacklisted.

For several years, farmworker advocates have sought to update these contracting laws to prevent such exploitation. But agriculture industry opposition has stilled those efforts.

As originally written, SB 6261 sponsored by Sen. John McCoy (D-Tailalip), proposed a number of reforms that would protect these workers. It established farm labor contractor licenses requiring surety bond and insurance coverage, created joint liability for unlicensed contractors and farmers who knowingly hire them, and ended a loophole whereby existing regulations do not apply to contractors classified as nonprofit organizations. Importantly, it also prohibited retaliation against H-2A workers who file complaints, testify in such proceedings, or consult with farmworkers advocating for their rights.

But once again, it faced aggressive opposition from agricultural interests and was scaled back to remove the licensing, joint liability and retaliation language. As amended, it simply closed the non-profit loophole.

Even that small but important change required strong support from Familias Unidas por la Justicia and Columbia Legal Services to get passed. In the end, SB 6261 passed the Senate 32-16 (Vote #4) and the House 57-39 (Vote #7). So progress was achieved, but much more remains to be done.
Transportation system needs cash infusion

By VLAD GUTMAN-BRITten

Our state’s transportation system is in serious need of investment. The reasons are many, but to highlight a few:

- WSDOT estimates that it receives less than half of $1.24 billion it needs to maintain the roads, ferries and other resources it uses.
- The U.S. Supreme Court’s culvert decision gives the state 10 years to invest approximately $3 billion in fish passage improvements to honor treaties with tribal nations to restore historic fish runs.
- We are years behind on several major road projects, including the I-5 bridge over the Columbia River. The oldest part of the bridge dates to 1917 and must be replaced for safety reasons, and the new bridge should include expanded transit capacity. Other major projects abound, including replacing the US-2 trestle.

Our state has woefully underfunded transportation accounts, especially the multimodal account. Our unnumber of transportation accounts, especially the multimodal account. Our underinvestment increases congestion and greenhouse gas pollution, and because transportation costs are a larger share of low-income households’ spending, it disproportionately hurts those among us least able to bear the costs. It costs on average nearly $10,000 to own and operate a car every year. Helping folks who want to opt out of these costs and choose lower-cost transit is a profound economic justice issue.

The Legislature finished the session without making substantial cuts to transit or highway construction projects, but legislators warned this would only be possible once. Without a new revenue package next year, we will experience deep cuts in existing programs and investments that are already underfunded.

Sen. Steve Hobbs (D-Lake Stevens), the Senate’s Transportation Committee chair, and Rep. Jake Fey (D-Tacoma), his House counterpart, have indicated that they will spend interim working with stakeholders and others to begin developing new funding frameworks to fill the state’s needs. Others, including that committee’s vice chair Sen. Rebecca Saldana (D-Seattle), have also been sharing early thinking for how a progressive and equitable package can be structured. At the same time, the Joint Transportation Committee is tasked with identifying a range of potential revenue sources for consideration by legislators. All told, legislators are considering spending at least $15 billion over the next decade to revitalize and expand our transportation system to meet the needs of a growing population and a dynamic economy.

Any proposal that moves forward will include a state gas tax increase. Sen. Hobbs’ Forward Washington proposal includes an increase of 6 cents per gallon. But this year, for a substantial share of their new revenue, Senate proposals relied on different forms of carbon pricing, imposing a new charge based on the carbon content of fossil fuels that they are used. Under consideration are carbon taxes, where a fixed rate is assigned for emitted carbon; a cap-and-trade system, where regulated parties like oil refiners and fuel importers acquire pollution allowances at auction; and an air quality surcharge, a one-time charge on the purchase of a new car based on its projected lifetime greenhouse gas emissions.

Transportation packages don’t happen often. If we construct them correctly they will support thousands of construction jobs, expand mobility and access for everyone (not just drivers), connect our economy to the world, and support the healthy environment we want for ourselves and our children. It’s a significant investment. It will include a state gas tax increase. Sen. Hobbs’ Forward Washington proposal includes an increase of 6 cents per gallon. But this year, for a substantial share of their new revenue, Senate proposals relied on different forms of carbon pricing, imposing a new charge based on the carbon content of fossil fuels that they are used. Under consideration are carbon taxes, where a fixed rate is assigned for emitted carbon; a cap-and-trade system, where regulated parties like oil refiners and fuel importers acquire pollution allowances at auction; and an air quality surcharge, a one-time charge on the purchase of a new car based on its projected lifetime greenhouse gas emissions.

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The original grand compromise of the workers’ compensation system was that injured workers would give up their ability to sue their employers in exchange for “sure and certain relief” via this safety net program. It was never intended to become the adversarial system it has become. Too often, employers have created cumbersome administrative hurdles for injured workers to get their benefits.

The bill would have required workers’ compensation claims and undermine the ability of injured workers to get the wage replacement and the medical benefits they are due. HB 2409, sponsored by Rep. Christine Kilduff (D-University Place), will increase penalties for employer misconduct in workers’ compensation and specify their responsibility of fair conduct. It passed the House 52-44 (Vote #4), the Senate 39-9, and was signed by Gov. Jay Inslee.

Employers and the state Department of Labor and Industries often require unnecessary and invasive Independent Medical Exams for injured workers trying to heal and return to work. Legislators have heard testimony about workers who, having already met with multiple doctors to diagnose and recommend treatment for a work-related injury, are then forced again and again to return for IMEs, postponing the claim’s allowance and delaying medical treatment.

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No tax break ‘snapbacks’ without accountability

This year, a big corporation came to Olympia and asked legislators to take away a major tax break that saves it millions of dollars each year.

No, really. This happened.

Boeing asked legislators to end the tax incentive in order to resolve a World Trade Organization dispute and avoid harmful retaliatory trade tariffs.

Organized labor supported this idea, but took issue with a key component of HB 2495 / SB 6690. The legislation included a “snapback” provision that would allow the state, without the Legislature’s authorization, to automatically reinstate the tax preferences if the WTO dispute is resolved and allows the incentives to remain in place.

Larry Brown, President of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, joined IAM District 751 President Jon Holden and SPEEA Legislative Director Brandon Anderson in testifying against such a snapback with no strings attached. The union leaders are many, but to highlight a few:

- WSDOT estimates that it receives less than half of $1.24 billion it needs to maintain the roads, ferries and other resources it uses.
- The U.S. Supreme Court’s culvert decision gives the state 10 years to invest approximately $3 billion in fish passage improvements to honor treaties with tribal nations to restore historic fish runs.
- We are years behind on several major road projects, including the I-5 bridge over the Columbia River. The oldest part of the bridge dates to 1917 and must be replaced for safety reasons, and the new bridge should include expanded transit capacity.

Our state has woefully underfunded transportation accounts, especially the multimodal account. Our underinvestment increases congestion and greenhouse gas pollution, and because transportation costs are a larger share of low-income households’ spending, it disproportionately hurts those among us least able to bear the costs. It costs on average nearly $10,000 to own and operate a car every year. Helping folks who want to opt out of these costs and choose lower-cost transit is a profound economic justice issue.

The Legislature finished the session without making substantial cuts to transit or highway construction projects, but legislators warned this would only be possible once. Without a new revenue package next year, we will experience deep cuts in existing programs and investments that are already underfunded.

Sen. Steve Hobbs (D-Lake Stevens), the Senate’s Transportation Committee chair, and Rep. Jake Fey (D-Tacoma), his House counterpart, have indicated that they will spend interim working with stakeholders and others to begin developing new funding frameworks to fill the state’s needs. Others, including that committee’s vice chair Sen. Rebecca Saldana (D-Seattle), have also been sharing early thinking for how a progressive and equitable package can be structured. At the same time, the Joint Transportation Committee is tasked with identifying a range of potential revenue sources for consideration by legislators. All told, legislators are considering spending at least $15 billion over the next decade to revitalize and expand our transportation system to meet the needs of a growing population and a dynamic economy.

Any proposal that moves forward will include a state gas tax increase. Sen. Hobbs’ Forward Washington proposal includes an increase of 6 cents per gallon. But this year, for a substantial share of their new revenue, Senate proposals relied on different forms of carbon pricing, imposing a new charge based on the carbon content of fossil fuels that they are used. Under consideration are carbon taxes, where a fixed rate is assigned for emitted carbon; a cap-and-trade system, where regulated parties like oil refiners and fuel importers acquire pollution allowances at auction; and an air quality surcharge, a one-time charge on the purchase of a new car based on its projected lifetime greenhouse gas emissions.

Transportation packages don’t happen often. If we construct them correctly they will support thousands of construction jobs, expand mobility and access for everyone (not just drivers), connect our economy to the world, and support the healthy environment we want for ourselves and our children. It’s a significant investment.

The original grand compromise of the workers’ compensation system was that injured workers would give up their ability to sue their employers in exchange for “sure and certain relief” via this safety net program. It was never intended to become the adversarial system it has become. Too often, employers have created cumbersome administrative hurdles for injured workers to get their benefits.

The bill would have required workers’ compensation claims and undermine the ability of injured workers to get the wage replacement and the medical benefits they are due. HB 2409, sponsored by Rep. Christine Kilduff (D-University Place), will increase penalties for employer misconduct in workers’ compensation and specify their responsibility of fair conduct. It passed the House 52-44 (Vote #4), the Senate 39-9, and was signed by Gov. Jay Inslee.

Employers and the state Department of Labor and Industries often require unnecessary and invasive Independent Medical Exams for injured workers trying to heal and return to work. Legislators have heard testimony about workers who, having already met with multiple doctors to diagnose and recommend treatment for a work-related injury, are then forced again and again to return for IMEs, postponing the claim’s allowance and delaying medical treatment.
The labor movement in Washington state is strong and growing in numbers. With the third highest union density in the United States, working people are organized all over Washington, across all industries and sectors, with shared values about race, region, ethnicity, and political affiliation. Advancing policies that benefit all working people is WSCL’s agenda and represents the diversity of the labor movement in the Pacific Northwest.

There can be a tendency to narrow our focus to the differences among the 550,000 working people who are represented at the Washington State Building and Construction Trades Council, lead to passage of this landmark piece of legislation. Speaking of the building trades, it is essential for protecting the wellbeing of working people, our communities, and our natural resources.

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